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ABSTRACT

Most academic advising conducted in the California Community Colleges is accomplished through a formal system administered by professional academic advisors/counselors. With recent cutbacks in funding, the amount of academic advisor time available to an increasing number of students is decreasing. In an effort to increase the availability of academic advising services, Yuba College began a student Peer Advising Program in 1989. Trained student peer advisors work as paraprofessionals under the supervision of two academic counselors. In spring 1991, a year-long project was undertaken in an effort to change the role of peer advisors, utilizing them more effectively as counselors rather than as clerical support for professional counselors. During three stages of the project (pre-, partial, and full implementation), students completed a satisfaction questionnaire immediately after their contact with a peer advisor. In addition, professional counselors on staff were surveyed at the end of both the partial- and full-implementation stages using an open-ended questionnaire. over the three phases of the study, a total of 225 students were surveyed. Findings included the following: (1) the time students spent with the peer advisor increased by almost 70% from the partial to the full implementation phase; (2) student satisfaction increased with each phase; (3) problems presented to the peer advisors were more academic in nature during the earlier phases; and (4) counselor attitudes about peer advisors did not change, and counselors remained divided on the usefulness of peer advisors. (JSP)

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Assessment of the Student Peer Advisor Program: A change in roles

Yuba Community College
July 20, 1992

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Abstract

Most academic advising conducted in the California Community Colleges is accomplished through a formal system administered by professional academic advisors/counselors. With recent cutbacks in funding and an uncertain budget future, the amount of academic advisor time available to the increasing number of students entering Community Colleges is decreasing.

With the decreasing availability of professionally trained staff to advise students, it is likely that students will turn to a more expedient and convenient source of academic advising, their fellow students. The pitfalls of this advice giving are well documented, however, there is little an institution can do to decrease this practice short of providing more academic advisors.

In an effort to cope with this problem, and increase the availability of academic advising services, Yuba College began a student Peer Advising Program in 1989. About ten students per year are formally trained in a sixteen week course that teaches students basic academic advising skills. Once trained, Peer Advisors are interviewed and selected to work as para-professionals in the counseling department and at various sites around the campus. Peer Advisors are supervised by two academic counselors.

Although the Peer Advisors are well trained and supervised, they have predominately been used as clerical support help for the counseling staff. In an effort to utilize the Peer Advisors more effectively, the peer supervisors designed a plan to change the current role of the peer to one for which they were trained. This new role change was to take about one year to implement.

In an effort to study this change, a study was designed and implemented over the course of the role change. Three data collection phases were conducted: pre-implementation (pilot phase); partial implementation; and, full

implementation. During all three phases, students were given a satisfaction questionnaire immediately after their contact with the Peer Advisor. This questionnaire included demographic and satisfaction items, as well as the type of problem presented to the peer and the length of contact. For the last two phases, counselors were surveyed about their use and perception of Peer Advisor abilities.

For the three phases of study, a total of 225 students were surveyed; 48 during the pilot stage, 93 during partial implementation and 84 during full implementation. Surveyed student demographics, including sex, ethnicity, and age were fairly well matched to the Yuba College population as a whole. Significant differences were noted in the amount of time students spend with Peer Advisors. The time spent increased almost 70% from the partial to the full implementation phases. Furthermore, student satisfaction increased from the partial implementation to the full implementation phases on all 10 satisfaction questions with significant differences noted on four of the questions. Problems presented to the Peers Advisors were noted to be more of an academic advising nature during the partial implementation phase than at the full implementation phase of the study. In addition, counselor attitudes about the Peer Advisors did not change from the partial to the full implementation phase. Counselors were divided on the usefulness of the Peer Advisors.

The study's mixed results can make interpretation difficult, however, what can be gleaned from this study is that the Peer Advisor role change has had a positive effect on student satisfaction with the Peer Advisor contact. Furthermore, Peer Advisors are spending more time with students, presumably in an advising role. Although it is difficult to control the type of problem presented to Peer Advisors, the change in problems presented to Peer Advisors

from more of an academic advising nature to general questions is somewhat disconcerting. Counselor attitudes, it appears, are difficult to change.

Directions for future studies might include tracking a cohort of students who have met with Peer Advisors and comparing their success rates with a comparable group. In addition, more involvement with line staff counselors might be helpful in increasing acceptance of the Peer Advisors.

Introduction

Traditional academic advising in the California Community Colleges has a long history of being conducted by professionals; college counselors and academic faculty. In general, these persons are trained in academic advising and hold advanced degrees in counseling. They operate under a formal system whereby they advise students about degree, certificate and transfer requirements, conduct personal counseling, and often teach orientation and career planning courses.

A student's first contact with an academic advisor in a Community College usually occurs when they are scheduled for an academic advising appointment, on or before the first day they register for classes. During this appointment, a counselor may discuss with the student their educational goals, the courses to take to achieve them and any other pertinent information related to the student's academic career. After an initial advising appointment, a student may schedule further meetings with an academic advisor.

Due to the large number of students entering the Community College system, demands on CCC counselor time is increasing, and it is expected that it will become even more scarce. Remedial student populations are continuing to increase, and with the rising cost of tuition as well as the known closure of numerous courses in both the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems, California Community Colleges are now serving many of the students that would traditionally attend CSU and UC systems.

Although California Community Colleges have a strong academic advising component built into matriculation services, it may well be at the limit of being effective. It is inevitable that students seeking academic advice, who cannot see a counselor in a reasonable amount of time, will turn to others they think can assist them. This may include faculty members not trained in academic advising as well as others, including fellow students. Negative consequences from this informal advice giving are obvious, with the most serious consequences being the delivery of inappropriate and inaccurate information. Students

will discuss with one another what classes to take and who to take them from, as well as a variety of other issues. Although it is well documented that often they take advantage of an informal system; students advising students (Layman, 1981), it is difficult to determine whether or not students are receiving accurate information from their peers. Unfortunately, it is probable that the use of these informal systems is likely to increase due to the repercussions of the recent budget deficit.

One way to circumvent this problem is to develop a formal academic advising program, delivered by Peer Advisors, students who can be trained and monitored. The advantage to this system is that for a relatively small investment, both in time and money, trained students can be providing academic advising to fellow students while being supervised by academic advising staff.

Yuba College Peer Advising Program: In response to a growing need to assist academic counselors and the students they serve, the Peer Advisor Program began at Yuba College in Spring 1989. Students wishing to become a Peer Advisor are first interviewed by the Peer Advisor Supervisor, a member of the counseling staff. A student then enrolls in Counselling 22 - Peer Advising Seminar. This sixteen week course is organized into 11 "Blocks." Each Block consists of an area of study that the student must complete. Block 1 is an introduction to academic counseling; Block 2 trains the student in understanding and interpreting the college placement exam and placement process; Block 3 teaches the student about the career programs the college offers; Block 4 acquaints the student with college services that are available to students; Block 5 uses student files to compute a GPA, read a transcript, and transfer credits to the CSU and UC systems; Block 6 enables the students to role play situations and teach the students appropriate referral techniques; Block 7 teaches the students about career development and exploration; Block 8 introduces the students to substance abuse counseling and community resources; Block 9 involves exercises in verbal and non-verbal communication; Block 10 teaches introductory crisis intervention skills; and Block 11 orients students to issues in cultural diversity.

At the completion of the course, students may be selected to serve as Peer Advisors, provided they successfully completed the course and funding is available. In general, there is funding for ten Peer Advisors per academic year.

Although peers have been well trained in basic advising tasks, they have not been able to fully utilize these skills. Rather than carry out the duties for which they have been trained, Peer Advisors primarily provide clerical support for the counseling staff. The supervisors of the Peer Advisor program have become increasingly disappointed with the tasks peers have been asked to perform and both the Peer Supervisors and the Peer Advisors have become frustrated.

To contend with this problem, a plan was developed last year by the Peer Supervisors, two academic counselors. The plan centers around changing the current focus of the Peer Advisors role away from predominately clerical tasks to peer advising tasks. The partial implementation of this plan was thought to take about one year. Consequently, a grant was written to study this transformation of the Peer Advisor program.

The following four hypothesis were tested:

Hypothesis 1: Student ratings of peer effectiveness will increase from the partial implementation to the full implementation phase of the peer role change.

Hypothesis 2: Student ratings of peer effectiveness for the full implementation phase will be significantly better than the student ratings of partial implementation group.

Hypothesis 3: Student ratings of peer effectiveness will help counselors to feedback information to Peer Advisors and subsequently train them to be better advisors.

Hypothesis 4: Peers will be assigned more tasks that involve their skills in peer advising.

Method

Measurement instruments: When investigating any new program or treatment, it is advisable to use a multiple method approach, as used in this study. A multiple lines of evidence

approach allows the investigator to obtain data from various sources in an effort to account for the weakness from any one data source (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). This method also allows the researcher to triangulate on a phenomenon by looking at it from different viewpoints.

To this end, a questionnaire was developed after reviewing several different counselor-student feedback satisfaction forms. The goal for the questionnaire was to create an instrument that would gather student demographic information, as well as perceived student satisfaction with the peer contact. Moreover, the instrument was designed to be completed in less than 5 minutes.

After piloting the instrument for three weeks in late Spring of 1991, an instrument was finalized. The final version contained eighteen items, seven devoted to student demographics including; age, sex, majors, ethnicity, number of completed units, number of times student had talked with a Peer Advisor, and whether the student was new to college. Satisfaction questions included 11 items centered around the purpose of the advising session; overall satisfaction with the Peer Advisor; listening skills; knowledge of Yuba College rules and procedures; and, interest in student needs. In addition, on each survey form given to students, the Peer Advisor was required to write in their initials, where they talked with the student, and how long the conversation lasted.

In addition to the student questionnaire, counselors were surveyed at the end of the partial implementation phase and again at the end of the full implementation phase using an open-ended questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine if counselor attitudes toward the peers had changed from the time that the program was first implemented to when the program was fully operational.

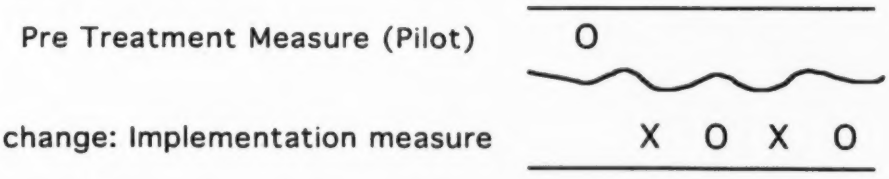
Participants: All students coming in contact with a Peer Advisor for the purpose of advising were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. Students met Peer Advisors in several places around the campus including a make-shift peer center, located in the counselor

waiting area, and the cafeteria. Students were told at the time they were given the questionnaire that their responses would be anonymous. Peer Advisors were available to speak with students during college business hours, 8 am to 5 pm.

Procedure: Three measurement periods took place: before the implementation of the role change (pilot phase); during the implementation of the change (partial implementation); and, after the change was fully implemented (full implementation). The first phase of this study, the pilot phase, took place in Spring 1991. The second phase, partial implementation, took place in the Fall of 1991. During this time, students coming in contact with a Peer Advisor were given a questionnaire to complete anonymously and deposit into a sealed box. Surveys were collected for a six week period between the College's registration cycles. Registration periods were not selected due to the focus of student problems on registrations issues only. The final phase, full implementation, occurred in the Spring 1992 semester. As with the partial implementation phase, surveys were distributed and collected during a six week period between registration cycles.

Partial implementation differs from full implementation in that after the partial implementation phase was completed, the results of the surveys were tabulated and used to help Peer Supervisors guide the ongoing training of Peer Advisors. Through this feedback, it is thought that Peer Supervisors and Peer Advisors could gain a better understanding of the concerns that student's expressed. Furthermore, additional training of the Peer Advisors was conducted on a weekly basis by the Peer Supervisors.

Plan for Analysis: A quasi-experimental design, a la Cook and Campbell (1979), was used. The design is diagrammed below:



Where, using Cook and Campbell's notation, 'O' stands for a measurement period and 'X' connotes a treatment period.

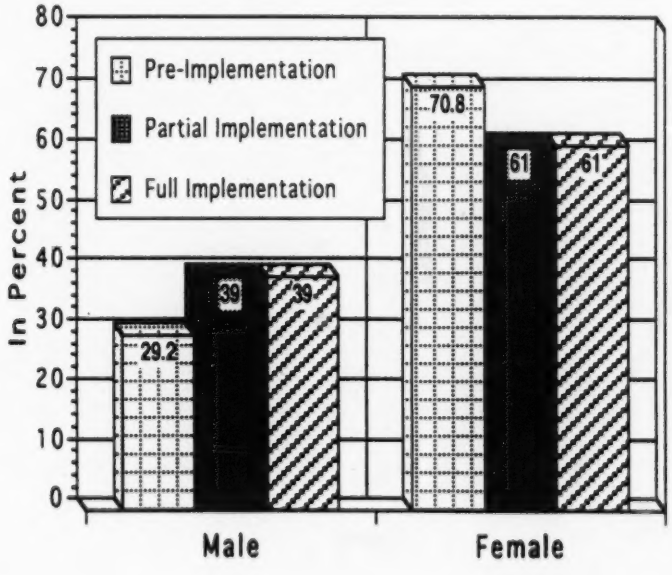
Results

Data was analyzed using parametric and non-parametric statistical approaches. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for salient demographic and satisfaction questions. Mann-Whitney U statistics were calculated for the purpose of determining the significance of various demographic variables and overall student satisfaction with Peer Advisors.

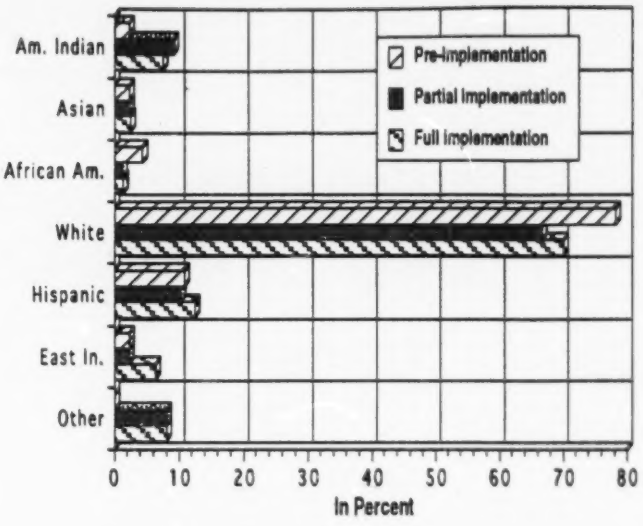
The following charts and tables describe the results from the three phases of the survey. Please note that complete information was not available on all questions for all phases of the survey. This is because the pre-implementation phase served as the pilot phase, and some questions were changed for the final version of the survey. Therefore, some comparisons between the phases were not made.

Forty-eight surveys were collected during pre-implementation , 93 during partial implementation, and 84 during the full implementation phase of the project. The following charts illustrate basic demographics for respondents:

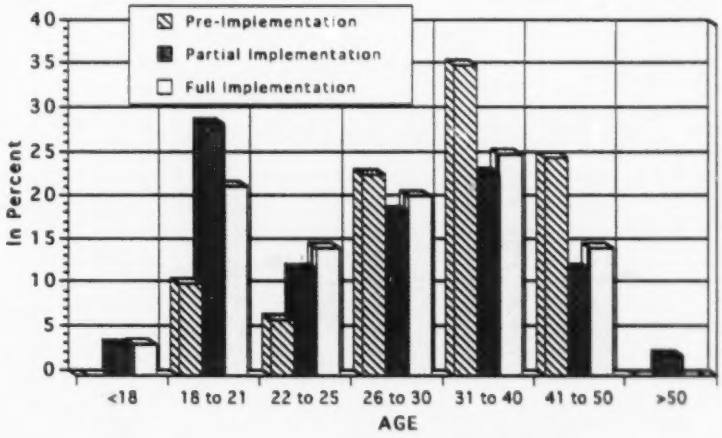
As depicted, there was a higher percentage of females responding to the survey than males, almost 2 to 1. Furthermore, a slightly higher percentage of female students responded to the questionnaire during the pre-implementation phases than at the other phases. The distribution of male/females during the partial implementation and full implementation phases is roughly equivalent to the overall pattern for Yuba College students throughout the district.



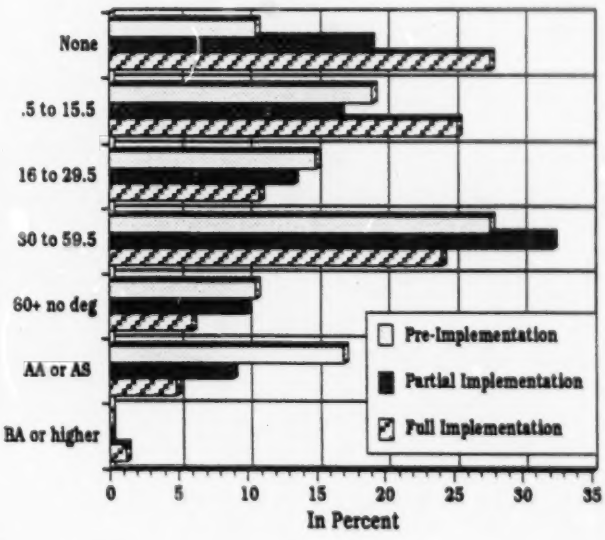
The highest proportion of students returning surveys were white. There were slightly more American Indians and slightly fewer African Americans returning surveys than is consistent with college demographics. However, in general, the demographic pattern for returned surveys is consistent with Yuba College demographics.



Although the pattern of age ranges are fairly consistent with Yuba College demographics, there was a slightly higher percentage of students in the 31 to 40 age range as well as the 41 to 50 age range than would be expected. This pattern was most evident during the pre-implementation phase of the study.

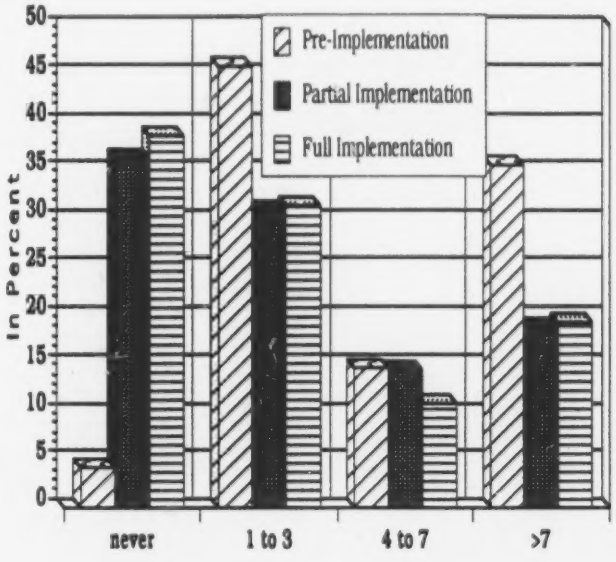


During pre-implementation, a majority of the students had 30 or more college units, the equivelent of one year of full-time study. During the partial implementation phase, a higher percentage of students seen had fewer units than those students seen at pre-implementation. Finally, at full implementation, a majority of the students had fewer than 30 or more units. This pattern suggests that over the course of the study,

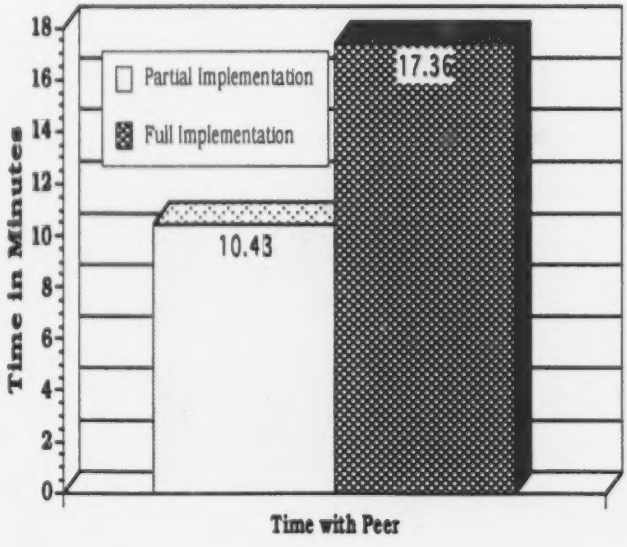


Peer Advisors are seeing a higher proportion of students with less college experience.

In addition to basic student demographics, the frequency of peer contact, as well as the amount of time a Peer Advisor spends with a student was also calculated. The chart to the right depicts the number of times a student meets with a Peer Advisor. This question gives a measure of repeat contact with the Peer Advisor staff. Peer advisors are encouraged to make follow-up appointments with students, and it is obvious from this chart that students do so. What is interesting to note is that the frequency of repeat peer contacts decreased once the role change was underway.

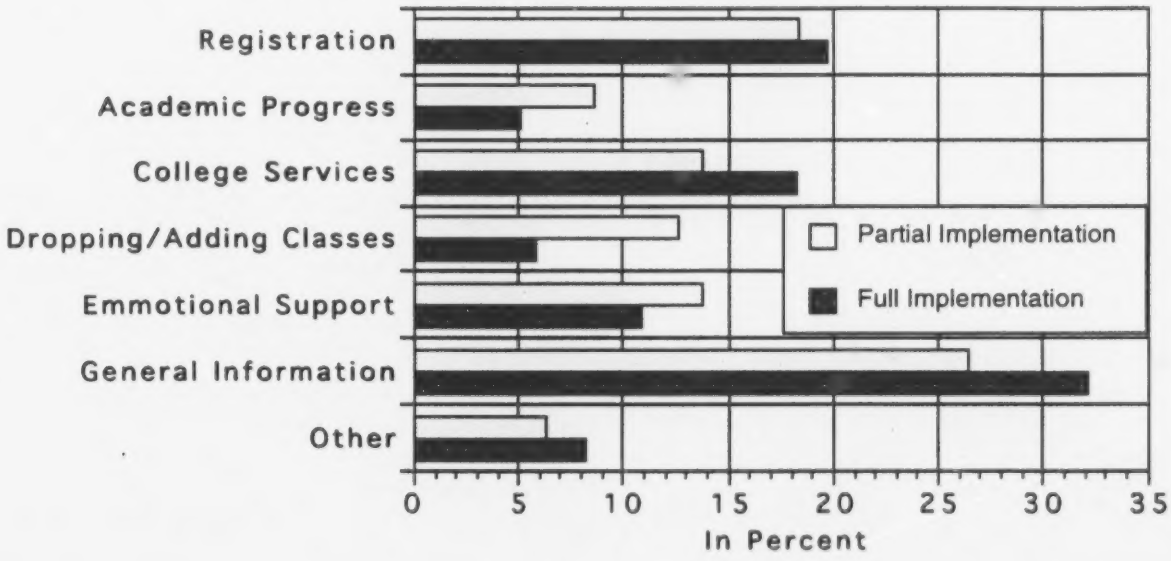


The number of minutes a peer is in contact with a student was also calculated for the partial implementation and full implementation phases of the project. Pre-implementation time in contact was not calculated due to the inconsistency of peer ratings.



For this question, peers were asked to list the number of minutes they spent talking with each student. From the partial implementation to the full implementation phase of the study there was an increase in the average time spent with each student by almost 70%. This difference is statistically significant ($t = -2.55$; $p < .05$).

The chart below describes the type of problems students listed that they presented to Peer Advisors. The most obvious differences between the partial implementation and full implementation phase are increased discussion of academic progress, emotional support and adding/dropping of classes during the partial implementation phase and an increase in the discussions of college services and general information during the full implementation phase.

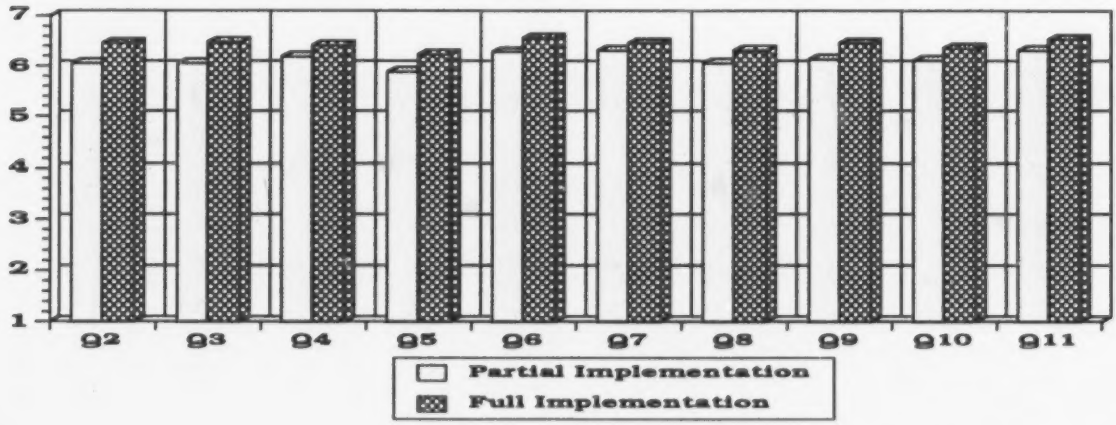


Performance Data: A total of nine questions about the peer contact were asked of students responding to the questionnaire. Each of the ten questions asked students to rate their satisfaction with the peer with whom they had just met. Each question is listed below:

Q2 - Listen to and understand my problem
Q3 - Show concern for my needs
Q4 - Provide me with accurate information
Q5 - Help me explore my options
Q6 - Be approachable and easy to talk to
Q7 - Keep my personal information confidential
Q8 - Make sure we all understand each other
Q9 - Refer me to the proper service if needed
Q10 - Help me to select classes that fit my schedule
Q11 - Overall how satisfied are you with the Peer Advisor

Questions were rated on a one to seven scale with a one indicating that the student was very dissatisfied, a four indicating moderately satisfied and a seven indicating extremely satisfied.

The chart below displays in graphic detail the responses to the ten questions during the partial implementation and full implementation phases. As can be noted from the chart, ratings increased from the partial implementation to the full implementation phase of the project on every question.



Significance testing was also conducted to determine if there were any meaningful difference between the partial implementation and full implementation phases of the project. Because the responses were ordinal, and not normally distributed, non-parametric Mann-Whitney U statistics were calculated for each of the satisfaction questions. The table below illustrates the results of this analysis:

Question #	$\bar{x}$ Par. Imp.	$\bar{x}$ Full Imp.	Z Score	P value
Q2	6.046	6.443	-1.888	.059
Q3	6.056	6.475	-2.266	.024*
Q4	6.169	6.395	-2.215	.027*
Q5	5.880	6.231	-1.802	.072
Q6	6.281	6.537	-2.420	.016*
Q7	6.304	6.443	-1.072	.284
Q8	6.046	6.309	-1.750	.080
Q9	6.129	6.436	-1.833	.067
Q10	6.099	6.349	-1.974	.048*
Q11	6.300	6.349	-1.888	.107

As the table indicates, significant differences were found on question 3, "show concern for my needs, " question 4, "provide me with accurate information," question 6, "be approachable and easy to talk to," and question 10, "help me to select classes to fit my schedule."

Qualitative Responses: In addition to quantitative comparisons, counselors were surveyed using an open-questionnaire that asked them to describe how they use the peers. Responses were collected from counselors at the end of both the partial implementation and full implementation phases. Specifically, counselors were asked:

Q1 - Please describe the tasks you have the Peer Advisors perform.
Q2 - Are the Peer Advisors adequately trained to perform the tasks you ask them to do? Please explain.
Q3 - What tasks, if any, would you like the Peer Advisors to do that they are not currently doing?
Q4 - What kinds of tasks are the Peer Advisors currently trained to do?
Q5 - How do you think the Peer Advisors could be used more effectively?

Implementation Responses: Six counselors responded to the partial implementation phase survey. For question 1, most counselors stated that they had Peer Advisors pull student folders and help students with registering for classes. This included helping students read and understand the schedule of classes, college catalog and the various forms that must be completed. Counselors also listed that Peer Advisors perform general clerical tasks such as making appointments for the counselors, take messages, deliver materials and routine errands.

Four counselors responded 'Yes' to question 2 and two counselors responded 'No'. Of the counselors who responded yes, some stated that they would like to add additional training, whereas others stated that they would like a peer assigned specifically to them to perform specific tasks. Of those that responded no, they stated that peers lack direction and do not take responsibility for making sure certain tasks (clerical in nature) are completed.

Question 3 yielded the most dichotomous responses from the counselors. Some of the counselors felt that they would like the peers to function more as para-professionals, others

felt that they do not possess the skills to function beyond primarily clerical tasks. Still others would like the Peers to perform other tasks such as giving tours to students.

Counselors were divided on question 4. Most felt that Peers were well trained in the tasks that they are asked to perform, while others stated that they have little confidence in the Peers abilities and feel that only professionals should perform professional tasks.

Finally, most counselors felt that the Peers need more training and that they need to work closer with the counseling staff. In general, counselors felt that Peers should be more proactive in helping students and should meet with each of the counselors on a regular basis. One counselor suggested that the department would be better served by hiring more clerical staff rather than Peer Advisors.

Post Implementation Responses: Responses for the full implementation phase were received from four counselors. They answered the same questions asked at the end of the partial implementation phase. A change, if any, would indicate a change in perceptions of the counselors about the Peer Advising staff.

After reviewing each of the five questions from the four counseling staff members returning surveys, it is noted that there were no significant changes in the perceptions of the counselors from the partial implementation phase to the full implementation phase on any of the questions.

Discussion

As the demographic data indicate, there are relatively few differences between the students surveyed and Yuba College students as a whole. This is encourgaing because it can be said that in general, on the demographics measured, the Peer Advisors are serving the general population of students attending Yuba College. The one notable difference is the change in

units over the different phases of the study. With each phase of the study, students seeking Peer Advisor assistance had fewer units. This can be interpreted positively in that students are seeking Peer Advisor advice earlier in their academic career.

Qualitative and quantitative comparisons yielded mixed results. It was expected that a change in the role of the Peer Advisor would evidence itself in longer contact with students seeking help, as was shown. In addition, because Peer Advisors received satisfaction feedback from students during the partial implementation phase, it was expected that there would be increases in student satisfaction on the questionnaire during the full implementation phase. However, it was not expected that the types of problems students would be presenting to Peer Advisors would focus away from academic issues and onto general issues, as was indicated. In addition, it would be expected that if a role change occurred, counselor attitudes regarding Peer Advisors would also change. This was not the case. Counselor attitudes regarding Peer Advisors were identical from the implementation to the full implementation phase.

So here we have a bag of mixed results. Conflicting results, or what has been termed lack of convergence (Mark & Shotland, 1987) can be difficult to interpret. However, some brief explanations are offered. The program has made moderate gains in role changes, according to the supervisors of the Peer Advisor Program, however some members of the counseling staff have resisted these changes, and do not see the peers any differently. Although it is clear that attempts are being made to utilize peers in a different way, the Peer Advisor role change is not fully implemented. To be fully realized, the role change will require that Peer Advisors are seen differently by staff members. This may occur over time, or through some other mechanism.

Although not discussed previously, it should be noted that the program was hampered by high attrition, which is common in a program of this type (Habley, 1979). Instead of the expected ten Peer Advisors, only four were left by the end of the Spring semester. Al-

though it is difficult to combat high attrition in a program of this type, especially since a Community College is a two year school, Program Supervisors are addressing this deficiency.

Future research efforts might focus on tracking a cohort of students that meet with a Peer Advisor and compare their success rates with a comparable group. In addition, it has been suggested that counselors mentor or "adopt a peer" to assist them with their work. It would be helpful to study the outcome of this endeavor.

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